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ABSTRACT

Despite the commissions and politicians that decry the failures of public education, thousands of teachers, principals, and administrators struggle daily to provide children with an education that will open doors. This article examines some of these educators' efforts, which demonstrate that change and success are possible. Interviews were conducted with Siegfried Engelmann, professor of instructional research at the University of Oregon College of Education; Joanne Johnson, a 4th/5th-grade teacher at Goshen Elementary School in Springfield, Oregon; Bruce Joyce, director of Booksend Laboratories in Pauma Valley, California; Robert Slavin, codirector of the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk at Johns Hopkins University; and Barbara Sizemore, dean of DePaul University School of Education. Some key strategies used by the five educators included: (1) direct instruction--a structured instructional program that works on the assumption that all children can learn and that basic skills should be the main focus of a compensatory-education program; (2) inquiry-based curriculum--an experience-based instructional philosophy in which curriculum is keyed to current events and issues of local or personal interest; (3) action research--a combination of approaches to improving classroom teaching and outcomes that combines specific steps designed to bring about improvement with testing to ensure the improvements occur; (4) Success for All--research-based programs in reading, writing, and language arts that emphasize cooperative learning, the identification of children in need, one-on-one tutoring where needed, assessment, and strong parent involvement; and (5) School Achievement Structure (SAS)--a highly structured set of routines designed to enable students, especially those living in poverty, to pass standardized tests. While there is no single, perfect way to create successful change, there are programs that work and people who are dedicated to improving educational opportunities. (LMI)

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PORTRAITS of SUCCESS

ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT

Volume 1, Number 1 June 1996

WHAT WORKS IN SCHOOLS:
FORM AND REFORM FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

by **Jim McChesney**

> *"There is always one moment in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in."*
> —Graham Greene, "The Power and the Glory"

In the past decade more than three billion dollars have been spent nationally on education in grades K-12. Local, state, and national commissions, boards, and experts have issued innumerable reports detailing the shortcomings of American education. Politicians across the spectrum have decried the failures of what we are doing, while offering little more than rhetoric and tough-sounding phrases as solution. Students continue to spend time in classes, with most parents hoping that their children are receiving an education that will open doors.

Thousands of teachers, principals, and administrators struggle daily, weekly, monthly—year in and year out—to budge those doors open a bit wider. Yet, one wonders if that door can still open and let that future in. One wonders why all the money, rhetoric, and dedication has left us less than satisfied with the results of our efforts. One wonders what will open those doors—what really works.

While the money continues to be spent, the commissions publish, and the politicians spout, there are those who stand at that doorway and work to lead the children through. Their efforts, examined in this article, do not provide a specific formula for success, but instead illustrate that change and success are possible.

SIEGFRIED ENGELMANN . . . DIRECT INSTRUCTION

One of those is Siegfried Engelmann, who believes that programs such as the structured instructional program he has developed, Direct Instruction, can open some of those doors. Scathingly, with the wit of a professional roaster and, at times, the vocabulary of a sailor, he pounces on everyone from politicians to professional educators who lack the nerve or insight to make the changes necessary to make a difference.

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The ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management created the Dan O'Brien Education Program in 1993 to inspire young people to gain the most from their education. The program highlights the achievements of Dan O'Brien, a realistic role model who has overcome hardships to hold the world record in the decathlon.

Portraits of Success, a resource for teachers and administrators who participate in the program, provides glimpses into the work of researchers and educators who are dedicated to the success of the nation's school children.

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Engelmann makes some pretty bold statements. He said things such as:

"If kids are having trouble learning, the teacher is having trouble teaching."

"Too many programs have been a disguise to cover up that what they are doing doesn't work."

"Slogans won't do the job. They just ensure that you will do it wrong."

It's pretty bold talk from a guy who has no formal training in education.

But he also makes bold claims about kids' abilities:

"If we have a kid with an IQ above 70, we can teach them to read."

"We look at the performance of kids with the idea that they can do it in a reasonable time to 100 percent mastery."

"Our kids can succeed, even those born in poverty."

This, too, is pretty bold talk—but it's talk that is backed up by over three decades of work in the field of education—work that has brought about demonstrable results not even claimed by other educators.

At 64, Engelmann, whose friends call him Zig, serves as a professor of instructional research at the University of Oregon's College of Education. He also is president of Engelmann-Becker Corp., a Eugene-based educational consulting firm that has achieved some of these outstanding results.

Direct Instruction is a program with a philosophy behind it that assumes that nothing should be left to chance. The assumptions underlying the Direct Instruction model are: (1) all children can be taught; (2) the learning of basic skills and their application in higher order skills is essential to intelligent behavior and should be the main focus of an educational program; and (3) the disadvantaged must be taught at a faster rate than typically occurs if they are to catch up with their middle-class peers.

The basics of Direct Instruction include such practices as:

- Separating students into small groups of comparable ability
- Teaching skills in a tightly scripted sequence
- Anticipating the errors children will make and being prepared for immediate responses
- Correcting students' errors immediately
- Avoiding of drawn-out explanations, using instead

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an immediate-response system that calls for 10-14 responses a minute from each student

• Teaching reading by use of a phonics system that emphasizes the hearing and sight components of words, as well as the blending of sounds into words

It is a system that has been tested in the largest educational experiment ever in the United States. The one-billion-dollar Follow Through Project, sponsored by the federal government in 1968, looked at the teaching of disadvantaged primary school children with the aim of determining what teaching programs work best with them.

Among the dozen different strategies tested, Englemann's University of Oregon Direct Instruction model outperformed the rest. The results included first place for Direct Instruction in reading, arithmetic, language, spelling, academic cognitive skills, basic skills, and self-esteem. It also placed first for urban sites, first for English speakers, and first for non-English speakers.

But the program was never widely adopted because it ran counter to the popular systems of the day—systems for which Engelmann has little regard.

"After Sputnik (the Russian satellite that frightened U.S. government officials and educators into thinking American students were falling behind), we started all sorts of new programs that were total failures," Engelmann said. "The new math—failure, the new science—failure, the reforms that followed *A Nation at Risk*—failure. We are talking 100 percent failure."

In his book *War Against the Schools' Academic Child Abuse,* Engelmann says, "After all these years, I'm still not sure I understand why it was so important for the establishment to discredit Direct Instruction. It's true we do not do things the way they do it in traditional classrooms. But what we do works and what they do doesn't. If society is concerned with kids, it would seem reasonable to find what works and use it, regardless of what our prejudices might be."

In spite of opposition to Direct Instruction, Engelmann and his associates have continued to offer their expertise to students, families, and districts across the nation. Work with three districts in Utah is bringing about results that parallel the success recorded in the national tests. "We are teaching kids to a high level of mastery," Engelmann said of the work being done in Utah. "These kids will function at least two grade levels above (the grade they are in) in all subjects—reading, math, science, art, even music. The high levels of math and science performance," he adds, "are for females as well as males."

In spite of opposition to Direct Instruction, Engelmann and his associates have continued to offer their expertise to students, families, and districts across the nation.

While being liked by others isn't his main goal, it is one that may be, however slowly, coming his way. In 1991, the ABC news show Prime Time Live looked at the success of Direct Instruction in Wesley Elementary, a ghetto school in Houston. Following the airing of the show, Engelmann was inundated with calls from across the nation. Here, too, one of the basic premises of Direct Instruction was applied—that the fault lay not in the minds of the students but in the strategies and tools mandated by administrators. Also, ABC's 20-20 featured Englemann last fall.

And again, as the government-sponsored tests showed and as the Utah experience is currently showing, children being taught by Direct Instruction are learning at a rate previously not experienced or expected. Students in first grade are turning out well-written compositions. Students in fifth grade are reading with a level of understanding and interest that would challenge many college students.

His answer is the same to those who wondered then and those who still wonder today what he is doing.

"We are trying to set standards," he said, "to show what is possible—to show that the best can be done."

Zig Engelmann may make some bold statements. But he also makes statements he can back up with success. He is an educator who insists on excellence and who knows that it can be achieved.

"Our kids can succeed," he writes in the final chapter of his book, "even those born in poverty. Our kids can receive the support, sensible legislation, and the kind of monitoring that other endangered species receive.

But such advocacy will not come about from the establishment. It won't happen unless you help make it happen."

JOANNE JOHNSON . . . A TEACHER WHO PUSHES OUT THE WALLS

Joanne Johnson is also making a difference. A fourth/fifth-grade teacher at Goshen Elementary School in Springfield, Oregon, Johnson was chosen Oregon Teacher of the Year in 1994. With her combination of commitment, creativity, and content, she, too, is proof that the doors can be opened.

The perfectly formed letters stand like icons above the blackboard, their upper and lower case script models of the way things should be from A to Z. Their visual imagery melds with the smell of paste, crayons, and chalk dust to create a sensation familiar to anyone who spent any time in any classroom in America during the past fifty years.

But some things are different in Joanne Johnson's classroom.

It could be the computer in the corner or the parakeet accompanying Beethoven's Fifth Symphony on the radio. It could be the bookshelf that houses the stories written by her students or the creativity of the stories themselves. Or it could be something else.

It could be Joanne Johnson, a teacher at Goshen for the past five years and a 1968 graduate of the University of Oregon's College of Education. Twenty years later she came back to the college for her master's degree. In 1994 she was named Oregon Teacher of the Year. She was also chosen to receive the McAuliffe Grant, which allows her to teach half time and use her classroom as a training site for other teachers, and the prestigious Milken Award, which awarded her $25,000.

On the first day of school, Joanne Johnson's classroom had only a rug, desks, and chairs, she explains. Nothing else decorated the walls or filled the floor space. Instead, she told her students it was up to them to design their classroom.

So they did. They thought about it, talked about it, and drew maps. They decided how the desks should be arranged, where the artwork should be displayed, and where the books should be shelved. They made a classroom for themselves.

While it was an enjoyable exercise for the students, Johnson had other reasons for allowing her fourth-graders to design their own learning space. "I wanted them to create their own environment to learn in," she said. "Those are the kind of skills they will need to move into the twenty-first century. "Most people will change careers many times during their lifetimes," she pointed out. "The ability to adapt to those changes and create new environments will be essential to their success."

Johnson's success is not dissimilar to that for which she helps prepare her students. She, too, has learned to adapt to changing times and changing student needs.

The classrooms and curricula of the past, which may have been appropriate for their time, are not what is needed today, Johnson believes. She points to the changes in society—more single-parent families and families where both parents work—that affect the classroom.

Parental attention is often of necessity devoted to other needs, and children's academic needs can be affected. "Parents care deeply about their children," she said, "but survival is so basic it takes precedence."

"It's important to be training kids how to think," Johnson explained. "We're training them for jobs we don't even know about."

It is in that context that Johnson works to broaden the curriculum to meet not only the needs presented by changes at home, but also those that society will present in the twenty-first century.

"It's important to be training kids how to think," Johnson explained. "We're training them for jobs we don't even know about."

To do that, to prepare today's fourth-graders to be able to succeed in jobs not yet defined, Johnson has created a sense of flexibility in the classroom and a curriculum she said is "closer to real life."

Textbooks are secondary sources.

Experience is primary.

Last year, she elaborated, her class became interested

in the homeless, which led to individual research by each student, as well as a trip to a local car camp for the homeless. Students interviewed members of homeless families, talked with a reporter from the local newspaper who covered the issue of homelessness, and worked on projects to help the homeless.

Johnson has created a sense of flexibility in the classroom and a curriculum she said is "closer to real life.

In the process, Johnson said, her students learned about more than homelessness. "Do you realize what that one issue leads to?" she added. "They learned about economics, law, and government—about the connections between all areas of life."

"It's another example of real-life curriculum, that generative, inquiry-based curriculum," she added.

"The year before, we made quilts. Senior citizens and older people came in to make quilts and explain to us what they were doing. We put the quilts together then gave them to a shelter for battered women. It was a great learning and teaching experience.

"That's the joy of teaching," she added.

For Johnson, it's a joy that has long been present.

"I always wanted to teach," she said. "I loved to learn. I wasn't the quickest, but I always loved that learning experience."

It's a love that has served her students for two decades, as well as one that was recognized by the state of Oregon last year when it named Johnson its 1993-94 Teacher of the Year, based on her innovative ideas and her ability to put those ideas into practice in the classroom.

But even Johnson acknowledges that it was an honor that put pressure on her. "It was hard for me," she said. "I work with kids. It's much more difficult dealing with the media." But, in the spirit of her profession, she added, "I learned a lot."

She also traveled a lot, speaking in public forums and before the press, visiting Washington, D.C., for the National Teacher of the Year ceremonies, and visiting schools in Oregon.

The McAuliffe grant allows Johnson the time and means to use her classroom as a demonstration site open to fifteen Lane County teachers per term.

Johnson is also bringing her experience back to the College of Education with a class entitled "Creating an Instructional Curriculum."

The heart of the class, she said, is the same as the message she conveys to the teachers she coaches in her classroom—in fact, the same that she conveys to her fourth-graders at Goshen Elementary School.

"I want to push the walls out and get them into the world," she said.

It's a world that extends far beyond the perfectly scripted letters that rise above the blackboard showing the way things used to be from A to Z.

BRUCE JOYCE . . . ACTION RESEARCH AND MORE

A researcher who believes that something can be done to make a difference—that some things do work, and that those things that work can be replicated—is Bruce Joyce. He is director of Booksend Laboratories, in Pauma Valley, California.

Joyce's book *Models of Teaching*, coauthored by Marsha Weil, was first published in 1972. Since then he has updated it five times, with each new edition attempting to reflect a combination of philosophies upon which to build and practices upon which to act.

In his most recent book *Learning Experiences in School Renewal*, which Joyce edited along with Emily Calhoun, the emphasis is on what works. The book describes and analyzes five different programs across the country that succeeded in moving beyond rhetoric to results.

The five large-scale renewal programs were conducted, Joyce writes in the introduction, "as action research into the school-renewal process itself. The settings included five low-achieving schools in a large West Coast city, sixteen schools in a medium-sized Southwest city, all eleven schools of a Midwestern university town, the nine elementary schools of an overseas DoDDS (Department of Defense Dependent School) unit, and sixty-four schools in a Southeastern state action-research center."

Out of these experiences come some generalizations. Joyce is not hesitant to criticize much of the

status quo, but, like Engelmann, he has ideas about what works that are based on experience.

Action research is one of the key elements to each of the successful programs Joyce has documented. Simply put, action research involves the steps a school or district takes to bring about change and the testing it conducts to ensure that the change is for the better.

The actions of all five programs resulted in "both confirmations and surprises," but all indicated that "schools can improve themselves, and quite rapidly, although not necessarily through the paradigms that embody the popular assumptions of our culture."

There are many ways to approach solutions, Joyce said, but two of them are working with the process and making changes in curriculum and instruction.

Most attempts at reform, Joyce said, never get done. A lot is put down on paper, but no one ever does anything. Because in most schools and districts there is very little real central control, Joyce said that teachers are rarely "forced" to do anything.

"It's not a choice between democracy and autocratic leadership. It's a collection of Lone Rangers loosely coupled to an organizational authority."

He offers another analogy: "It's like the military developing a new airplane, but letting it sit on the airfield and never using it. The military, with all its defects, would never do that. Education does."

One of the answers to this dilemma, Joyce said, is democracy. "What needs to be developed," he said, "is a program that enables the group to become a democratic problem-solving group."

Why democracy? "Because," Joyce said, "it's the best way to solve problems."

The results of such attempts, he said, can be the establishment of faculties that are committed to a collegial organization that can then begin the intensive study of teaching and curriculum. The impact of such action can be dramatic. One middle school reported promotions rising from 30 percent to 90 percent within two years and sustained for six more years.

But, as with Engelmann's program or Johnson's efforts, it takes doing. Or, as Joyce and Calhoun express in their latest book,,"You must will it and live it."

The second general approach that Bruce advocates is changes in curriculum and instruction at the school or, if possible, the district level. Here, too, however, much of the focus is on teamwork and democracy.

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"Setting up a staff development system is hard," he said, pointing out that the first barrier to overcome is the perception that there is no need for such efforts.

"A very common position among boards and administrators is that the staff is like an old Victrola—if you wind them up they will play sweet music forever."

Such is not the case, he said. New approaches are needed that result in an ever-renewing staff development system.

"First," he said, "it means the people running the system have to acknowledge that they don't have a system."

And those who have no system are often not the best people to initiate one. Therefore, Joyce encourages districts to bring in outside trainers, people who know many models of teaching or who are experts in one or two.

"Study their record," he said. "You've got to be sure that what you buy will make a difference, that student learning will increase."

"Resistance to change is difficult to overcome," he pointed out. Yet, he insisted, most resistance comes from about 5 percent of the staff.

"Change can occur," he concluded.

ROBERT SLAVIN . . . SUCCESS FOR ALL

Robert Slavin, codirector of the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk at Johns Hopkins University, also believes that change can occur, that children can learn.

In a recent article in *Educational Leadership*, Slavin wrote about several programs that entail a comprehensive approach to restructuring schools.

One of these is his own program, Success for All, with a focus on prevention through early intervention for children in preschool through sixth grade. The program is research based, with instruction in reading, writing, and language arts, as well as an emphasis on cooperative learning and maintaining a balance among phonics, children's literature, creative writing, and home reading.

Success for All is reinforced by intensive professional development, a full-time building facilitator to help with instructional strategies, a curriculum-based assessment program to monitor student progress and identify children in need of additional help, and a strong parent-involvement program.

In addition, Success for All provides one-to-one tutoring for first-graders having difficulties with reading and a family-support team that helps parents get involved and provides them with strategies for helping their children. Research on Success for All, Slavin reported, shows that the program has consistently improved children's reading skills, resulted in average test scores well beyond grade levels, and cut special-education levels in half. These results were particularly dramatic, Slavin said, for at-risk students and those in the lowest quarter of their grades.

In addition to Success for All, Slavin points to several other programs that also enable children—especially those at risk—to succeed in school. These include: Reading Recovery, a first-grade tutoring program that has enabled large numbers of students to be reading effectively by the end of the first grade; Prevention of Learning Disabilities, a one-to-one tutoring program with an emphasis on general perceptual skills as well as reading; and Early Childhood Interventions, an intensive early intervention program that again demonstrates the vital importance of the stimulation of cognitive development in the first five years.

BARBARA SIZEMORE . . . ACCELERATION AND ELEVATION

In Chicago, sixty-nine-year-old Barbara Sizemore has a plan. In an interview with *Education Week*'s Ann Bradley (1996), the former superintendent of the District of Columbia schools insisted that children who live in poverty need a highly structured school with firm discipline and teaching that can enable them to pass standardized tests.

Her focus on tests is her way of "beating the system at its own game," and places the emphasis on results. Now dean of DePaul University School of Education, she works to bring about those results through what she calls the "ten routines," a list of ten essential elements to a quality education. The routines are assessment, placement, pacing and acceleration, monitoring, measuring, discipline, instruction, evaluation, staff development, and decision-making.

Sizemore insists that her approach, which she calls the School Achievement Structure (SAS), is not a program per se, but a mix of these key routines. With standardized tests as the determinant of what gets taught, the routines are implemented to determine progress and enable students to quickly move on to new tasks.

Though criticized for its narrowness of approach, Sizemore defends SAS as a way to provide a foundation for schools that have lost their way. Test results seem to indicate this foundation is solid, with one school

reporting third-grade reading scores improving by 20 percent.

OTHERS . . .

Of course, the people mentioned in this article are not alone in their struggle to open the doors—to prepare our children for a future that promises to be at least as challenging as any future of the past. As already noted, they are joined by thousands of teachers, principals, superintendents, and other professionals who work daily toward this goal, often under conditions that would send others on a quick retreat. One can only imagine how many lawyers, physicians, or dentists would be willing to work under conditions many educators face daily as the norm.

A physician whose challenges paralleled those faced by teachers and administrators in most major American cities would be singled out for courageous dedication by professionals and the press. She would make the cover of *Time* magazine. Her teaching counterparts just wonder where the time goes.

WHAT WORKS

Barbara Sizemore summed up her philosophy this way: "We use anything that works. I believe that teachers need to have an arsenal of strategies, I encourage my teachers not to label themselves." It is that idea of having "an arsenal of strategies" that this article has also attempted to encourage.

Some key strategies that stand out include the following:

1. *Direct Instruction*—a structured instructional program that works on the assumption that all children can be taught and that basic skills should be the main focus of a compensatory-education program.

2. *Inquiry-Based Curriculum*—an experience-based instructional philosophy in which curriculum ranging from reading and math to history and social studies is keyed to current events and issues of local or personal interest.

3. *Action Research*—A combination of approaches to improving classroom teaching and outcomes that combines specific steps designed to bring about improvement with testing to ensure the improvements take place.

4. *Success for All*—Research-based programs in reading, writing, and language arts that emphasize cooperative learning, the identification of children in need, one-on-one tutoring where needed, assessment, and strong parent involvement.

5. *School Achievement Structure*—A highly structured set of routines or steps designed to enable students, especially those living in poverty, to pass standardized tests.

While there is no single way, there are ways. While there may not be a perfect program, there are programs that work. While no one person can do it all, many people can do a substantial amount to bring about the change that will create that moment that the door opens and the future comes in.

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